

New bird to science emphasizes the critical need to conserve the remaining dry forests of Madagascar

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In a recent issue of the scientific journal *Zootaxa*, researchers from Madagascar and the United States described a new species of forest-dwelling rail. The new bird was named *Mentocrex beankaensis*, with the genus *Mentocrex* being endemic to Madagascar and the new species *beankaensis* being coined after the type locality, the Beanka Forest in western central Madagascar. This species was distinguished from another in the same genus, known from the eastern portion of the island, based on aspects of size, plumage, and DNA.

The project resulting in this description was the joint efforts of scientists from the University of Antananarivo and Association Vahatra in Madagascar and the Pritzker Laboratory for Molecular Systematics and Evolution at The Field Museum in Chicago. Marie Jeanne Raherilalao and Steve Goodman conducted the morphological portion of the study, and the [molecular genetics](#) aspects by Nicholas Block, a graduate student with the University of Chicago's Committee on [Evolutionary Biology](#) who is based at The Field Museum.

The dry forests of western Madagascar have been drastically reduced in size. Estimates proposed by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) indicate that 97 percent of the original [forest cover](#) in this portion of the island has disappeared since humans arrived some 2,500 years ago. Over the past decades these remaining dry forest areas have been the sites of numerous discoveries of plant and animal [species](#) new to science. The

Beanka Forest is a largely intact area resting on exposed limestone formation with razor-sharp pinnacle like structures, which are known in Malagasy, the language of Madagascar, as tsingy.

The Beanka Forest in a remote portion of the island is managed since late 2007 by the Association [Biodiversity Conservation](#) Madagascar (BCM) and funded by Bioculture (Mauritius) Ltd., which has started programs for the socio-economic development of surrounding communities, forest restoration, and the conservation of the site. The director of BCM, Mr. Aldus Andriamamonjy, notes, "We [BCM] have taken an approach to the conservation of the Beanka Forest resting on working in unison with local people to fulfill aspects of their economic and development needs and bestowing a sense of natural patrimony of the organisms that live in their forest. These are aspects critical for any long-term successful project. The discovery of this new species of bird and other organisms during the late 2009 expedition underlines the importance of our mission and the uniqueness of the Beanka Forest."

In late October to early November 2009, the Association Vahatra, in collaboration with BCM and several other research groups working on the flora and fauna of Madagascar, organized a large-scale biotic inventory of the Beanka Forest, a zone of about 14,000 hectares. This is the period when a specimen of the new rail was obtained and that led to the naming of this new species. Several new species of plants, invertebrates and vertebrates were discovered and *Mentocrex beankaensis* is the first of a series from the expedition to be named. Dr. Marie Jeanne Raherilalao, Professor at the University of Antananarivo and Association Vahatra, mentioned, "that even after many decades of research, nature is always full of surprises, even for organisms such as birds that have been intensively studied. The recent rediscovery in the northern portion of the island of the Madagascar Pochard, a species that was thought to be extinct and the discovery of this new species of rail, are cases in point. This underlies the importance of field research and

biotic inventories".

Provided by Field Museum

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